wiser

THE 2025 RETENTION SHIFT

THE RETENTION SHIFT

What to expect…

PART ONE

PART TWO

BUT FIRST, SOME HISTORY OF

EMPLOYER BRAND

Dawn of EB

It's the 90s. Barrow & Ambler have just introduced a phrase no one had ever heard before: 'Employer Branding'. A few years later, McKinsey & Co. publish their report, "War for Talent" highlighting the shift in talent competition from local to global.

> **It was an era marking fundamental mindset shift. Hiring became more than a HR function. Companies were starting to recognise that talent chose them. Not the other way round.**

Consumer branding and employer branding started to read from the same playbook, albeit, different chapters.

Rise of EB

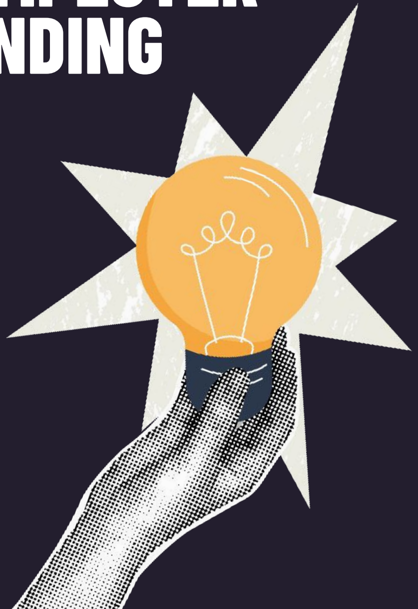
The term started to 'take off', seeping from journal papers and into meetings.

Budgets were allocated, and companies were trying to position themselves to be as attractive to talent as possible.

The introduction of LinkedIn (2002) and other online aggregate job sites allowed organisations a direct line to talent, enabling jobs and culture to be searchable with a click. They also allowed employees to rate their bosses like restaurants.

From 2009 onwards, UK vacancies kept on rising and the US unemployment [1] rate fell to a 50-year low in 2019. To put it lightly, ***'everyone'*** was hiring.

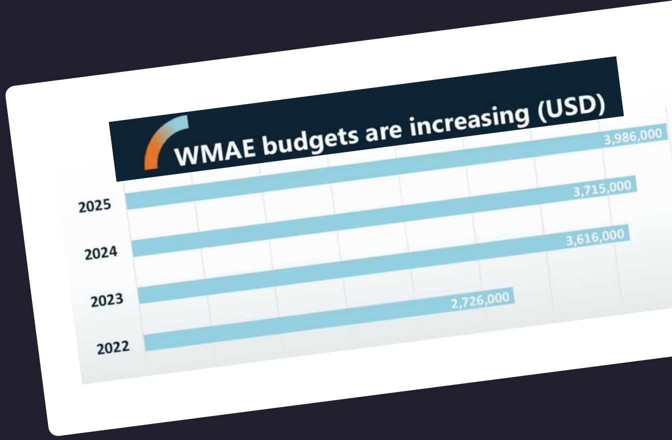
01 THE EVOLUTION OF EMPLOYER BRANDING



Today, vacancies are falling (UK [2], EU [3], US [4]). And as a result the EB of yesterday needs to adapt to survive.

The dawn and rise of EB saw a large focus on the glamorous outside-facing talent attraction. Internal-facing employee engagement and retention stood as forgotten siblings.

> **As we've traveled through time, 2022 saw 'The Great Resignation', 2023 'The Mass Layoffs' and 2024 'The Great Stay'. Now, in 2025, we enter the age of 'Descent, Dissent, Dissociation.' Employer branding turns inward, aiming to prevent further collateral damage.**



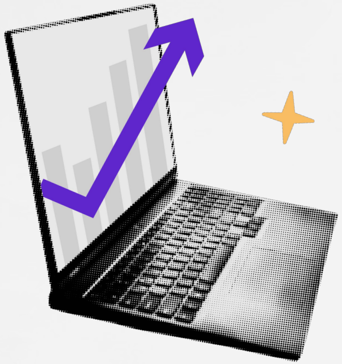
The WMAE (World's Most Attractive Employers) recognise this. As despite the general trend of halted hiring, year on year they've been increasing their EB budget.

Looking at the figures, there was a significant 46.23% rise from 2022 to 2025, with the biggest yearly increase in-between 2022 and 2023.

That's because it's easy to tell a story to someone who isn't familiar with the plot, you can get some lines wrong and the show goes on. But when you are reciting that story to someone who is living it everyday, you need to make sure that message is buttoned up.

02 THE CURRENT CLIMATE:

DESCENT, DISSENT, DISSOCIATION



Our data partner, Wisdom [6], tracks external talent perceptions, behaviours and priorities over time, sending surveys every six months to the general working population.

Our good friends have tracked employee engagement, revealing an industry agnostic decrease in the majority of industries compared to last year.

Those that have taken the biggest hit include the economic uncertain UK public sector [7,8], the laid off U.S retail [9] space and the talent short Canadian health industry [10].

Investigating further into the UK's low scores, those in 'HR' roles saw a substantial -0.6 drop in engagement, which aconso [11] found to be driven by teams feeling overwhelmed, stuck in cycles of layoffs and performance management, when they interviewed HR senior leaders. That overwhelming workload can also be found in the US as burnout is at a reportedly all time high [12].

While we are seeing specific international context and industry trends, there is an overarching global trend - of disengagement on the rise. It's one affecting all parties involved, except, there is no party.

CANADA Industry engagement scores

		Score difference from March 2024 - 25
6.7	Health	-0.6
6.7	Technology	-0.4
7.5	Public	-0.3
7.5	Property	-0.1

USA Industry engagement scores

		Score difference from March 2024 - 25
6.7	Retail	-0.6
6.7	Public	-0.4
7.5	Aviation	-0.4
7.5	Health	-0.4

UK Industry engagement scores

		Score difference from March 2024 - 25
5.8	Public	-0.6
6.8	Charity	-0.4
6.5	Media	-0.4
6.8	Banking	-0.3

03 THE POWER OF THE MIDDLE

The middle is where the neutrons strike. Sparking a chain reaction of descent, dissent, and dissociation.

70% of team engagement [13] can be directly attributable to middle managers, and with middle managers seeing the largest decline in engagement, falling from 30% to 27% [14], **they're the square root of disengagement.**

Over the years, the role has evolved. In Zhang's [15] analysis of job postings, prior to 1980, references to collaboration in newspaper ads were scarce. Recently, the requirement of collaborative skills and experience increased by three times between 2007 and 2021.

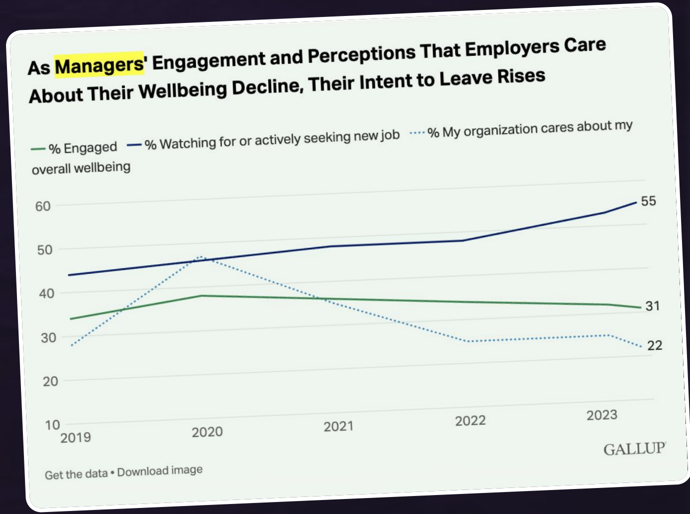
It's more than just directing tasks. They're fostering, or rather coaching, careers. Simply in Zhang's words, they're acting "less as Army commanders and more as basketball coaches".

However, businesses aren't enabling them to do their role. McKinsey found people managers spend less than a third of their time on talent and people management. 42% either disagree or are unsure whether their organisations set them up to be successful people managers [16].

They're stuck in the middle. The candle is burning at both ends. Pressure comes from up, and down. Leaders are unhappy with their unengaged, underperforming workforce. Employees are unhappy with their career growth and uncertain situation [17].

Blame is thrown down, blame is thrown up and where does it meet? In the middle.

Targeting middle managers is where you should set your sights. Changing your spark and chain reaction to be one of widespread re-engagement.



PART TWO

RE-ENGAGE > DISENGAGE

04 CULTURE'S POWER TO TRANSFORM

Structural change in isolation can cause rage against the machine, and a negative reaction to change. However, when we move structure and culture together, people feel invested in the transformation story.

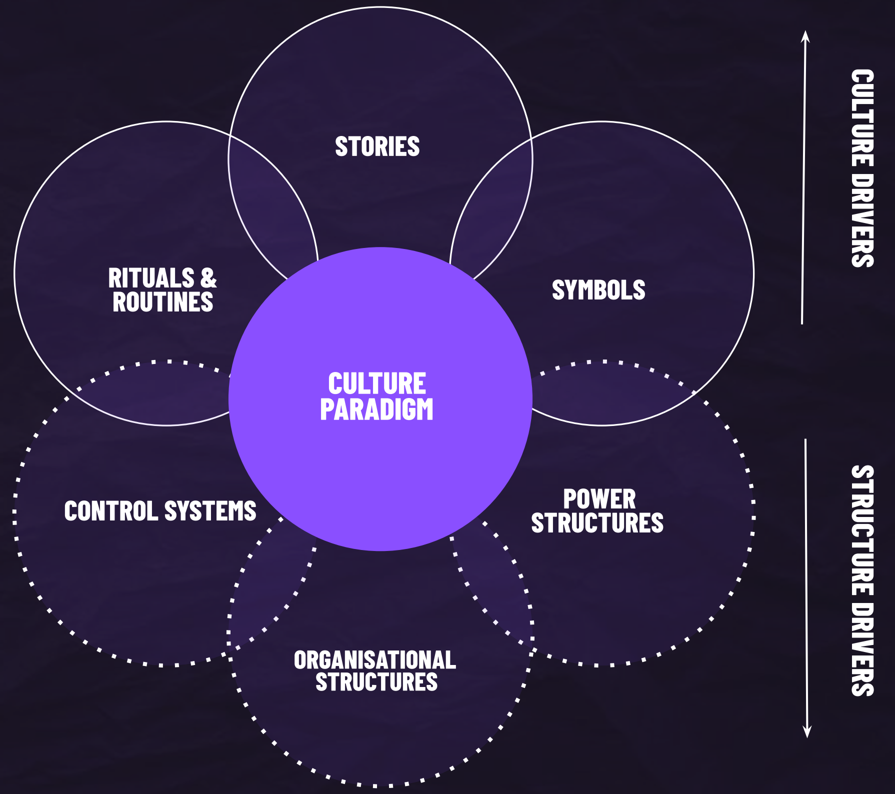
It's critical to remember that culture is created and perpetuated by people. To evolve it, you need to change hearts as well as policies.

> **The same employer brand you use externally can re-engage your workforce internally. Don't use it for half its worth, extract full value and get real bang for your buck.**

Published in their book 'Exploring Corporate Strategy' [19], Gerry Johnson and Kevan Scholes developed a framework to understand organisational culture by examining key elements that influence and reflect it.

Focusing on cultural drivers is where real, lasting change can begin.

Let's take a further look.



Johnson and Scholes, 1992 [19]

ONE

RITUALS & ROUTINES

Not carved in stone, but definitely etched in habit.

It's the Friday shout-outs. The weekly team check-ins with their signature start. The leadership stand-ups, the newsletters, the onboarding intros and the offboarding thank-yous. **Saying goodbye should feel as considered as saying hello.**

These rhythms bring structure to the day-to-day. Often quiet, they shape how we show up and set the tone for what's rewarded — even when no one's watching.

And then there are the unwritten rules. Like how new joiners learn never to request a song change on the office speaker.

These rituals aren't enforced — they're felt. And over time, they become the culture's metronome.

> **But here's the catch: they shouldn't be another thing middle managers have to own alone.**
>
> **Reinforcing the right habits is something to build together, not delegate.**

TWO

STORIES

“Hey, remember when…”

Every company has those stories. Whether it’s a chaotic pitch save, a legendary all-hands, or a wild founder origin tale — these moments travel, signal, and stick.

They do more than entertain. They set expectations.

> **They show what good looks like. They quietly say, this is who we are, and this is how we do things here.**
>
> **Suddenly, everyone understands what’s needed. Signalling what success looks like and what behaviours are celebrated.**

Value awards are a great example — because when you reward behaviours that reflect company values, you’re not just giving a nod. You’re creating a story others will remember, repeat, and follow.

And when you're trying to define a future state? **Don’t just list it.**

Storytelling makes that future tangible. It’s how you turn strategy into something people can picture, connect with, and believe in.

THREE

SYMBOLS

The power of a symbol is that it skips the explanation.

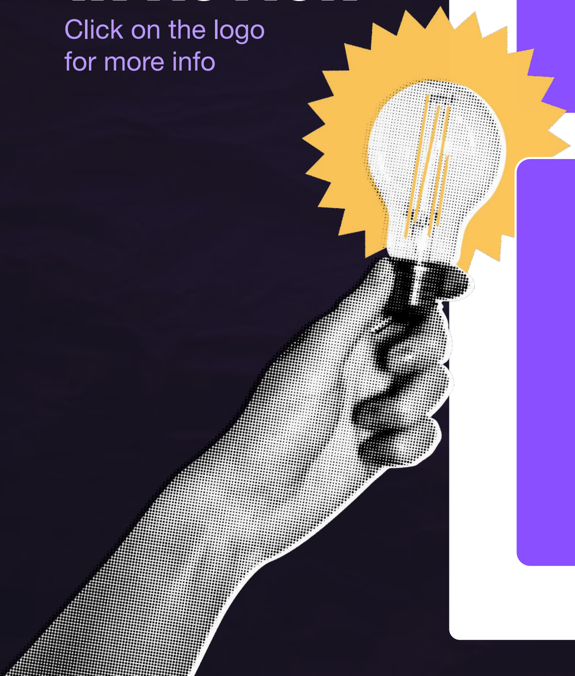
Like the London Underground sign. Just a glance pulls up a full set of associations and expectations. In the same way, cultural symbols act as fast, shared signals. They tell people what matters without saying a word, acting as a navigational tool, a cue signposting what matters.

Think, values printed on the office wall, messaging pillars embedded within onboarding slides, screensavers that reinforce the company mission, named meeting rooms, or custom slack emojis.

These all become part of a second language that everyone sees, speaks, and understands, even if it's never formally taught.

05 CASE STUDIES IN ACTION

Click on the logo
for more info



GOOGLE'S PERSONAL RITUAL

A simple policy that intends to bolster innovation gives employees time to explore personal projects. Check out Google's 20% time concept.

Google

JEFF'S SYMBOL OF ROUTINE

Outlawing PowerPoint presentations saw the creation of a new way to start meetings. A printed memo acts as a symbol of Jeff's new ritual and routine.

amazon

AIRBNB'S ENTREPRENEURIAL STORY

In an attempt to gain much needed funds. Founders got creative, and crafted an unusual plan involving cereal boxes and a Presidential campaign.

airbnb

THE WISER OFFICE

Values on the wall, a purple VW wagon and a rainforest in the attic. See Wiser's offices and how they've incorporate symbols in their everyday workplace.

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SOURCES

[1] BBC News, 2019 - access here

[2] BBC News, 2025, - access here

[3] Eurostat, 2025 - access heere

[4] University of Maryland, 2025 - access here

[5] Universum, 2025 - access here

[6] Wisdom, 2025 - access here

[7] The Guardian, 2025 - access here

[8] The Guardian, 2025 - access here

[9] DBBNWA, 2025 - access here

[10] Government of Canada, 2025 - access here

[11] aconso, 2024 - access here

[12] Forbes, 2025 - access here

[13] Gallup, 2024 - access here

[14] Gallup, 2025 - access here

[15] Letian Zhang, 2024 - access here

[16] McKinsey & Company, 2023 - access here

[17] CIPD, 2025 - access here

[18] Gallup, 2025 - access here

[19] Johnson & Scholes, 1992 - access here